

McGregor Range, New Mexico Land Withdrawal Renewal Legislative Environmental Impact Statement



History



History of McGregor Range

McGregor Range, located in Otero County, New Mexico, is home to one of the U.S. Army's premier training and weapons testing centers. The Army's development of McGregor Range is a fundamental part of the area's history.

Early Settlers

The McGregor Range land area has long been used by Native Americans for hunting and gathering of resources. Early Spanish expeditions in this area between about 1650 and 1850 met with opposition from the Mescalero Apache. Prior to the 1860s, the lack of water and the potential for conflict with the Mescalero discouraged settlement. A few ranchers moved into the area in the late 1860s and early 1870s. It was not until the 1880s that the number of settlers in the region increased as water acquisition capabilities improved, and the Apaches were moved to reservations.

Early homesteaders represented a diverse blend of occupations and backgrounds. Whether from the United States, Mexico, or Europe, these early settlers became involved in a variety of activities, from ranching to land and water speculation, to mining and oil exploration, all of which impacted the development of the Sacramento Mountains and eastern Tularosa Basin.

Sacramento Mountains Settlers

Oliver Milton Lee came to the area in 1884 from Texas. In 1886, Lee and other local ranchers formed the Sacramento Cattle Company, which began working on ways to bring

water to the area. Although this cattle company ultimately dissolved, Lee continued to expand his water system and ranching interests. By 1916, he had an elaborate water system from the Sacramento Mountains to the village of Oro Grande, New Mexico and east across Otero Mesa. By the time Lee died in 1941, he owned or controlled more than 300,000 acres in Otero County.

John E. Prather and his family moved from Texas to New Mexico in the mid-1880s. By 1899, the family had established the Prather Ranch on Otero Mesa. Ranching on Otero Mesa was difficult, but one son, John A. Prather, had created a successful ranch by 1944. The military sought to acquire his property, but he refused to sell. In July 1956, the government condemned his land, but Prather refused to leave. Sentiment in the area convinced the government to allow Prather to remain on his ranch headquarters property. He is buried on the property that is now part of McGregor Range.

Role of the Military in the Region

The first U.S. Army presence in the area was in 1846; 2 years later the area became part of the United States. Because of fear of conflict between Indians and settlers, local residents requested a stronger military presence, and Fort Bliss was established in 1854. Fort Bliss brought stability to the area, and El Paso became a regional commerce center.

The beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 focused the attention of the United States on the need to augment U.S. forces along the border. World War I brought

more than 40,000 soldiers to Fort Bliss by the end of 1916. During the World War II era, between 1938 and 1945, the installation expanded through land leases and acquisitions between the Organ and Hueco mountains in Doña Ana and Otero counties, New Mexico, including what later became part of McGregor Range.

Creation of McGregor Range

Planning for McGregor Range began in 1948 when the Army determined that an additional anti-aircraft artillery firing range was needed to supplement ongoing military training activities at Fort Bliss. The proposed lands covered 374,000 acres in Otero County, New Mexico. Following a series of negotiations with area ranchers, the Army entered into a 5-year exclusive use lease agreement. Malcolm McGregor, a rancher who owned over half of the lands to be acquired by the Army, played a pivotal role in the success of these negotiations; it is after him that McGregor Range is named.

The McGregor South Firing Corridor was expanded and the military acquired additional lands with the advent of the Cold War. The Army began to place increased importance on its Nike missile program in the early 1950s. More training areas than were available were required.

With the impending expiration of the exclusive leases, McGregor Range was gradually expanded, and by 1954, all privately owned land except Prather's had been acquired through purchase or condemnation. This extension, which was to be

used for missile training and testing, included the Otero Mesa and the Sacramento Mountains.

In 1957, Congress withdrew over 680,000 acres of public land in Otero County for use as a missile range for a period of 10 years (Public Land Order 1470) with a provision for an additional 10 years. Congress renewed the withdrawal of over 600,000 acres through the *Military Lands Withdrawal Act (MLWA) of 1986* (Public Law 99-606) for a period ending in the year 2001.

McGregor Range Land Withdrawal

The MLWA of 1986 requires that all of the military land withdrawals it governs, including McGregor Range, terminate on November 6, 2001, unless renewed by an Act of Congress. To continue military activities on McGregor Range beyond 2001, the Army applied to renew the withdrawal during October 1998. Part of the renewal requirement includes completion of a *Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS)* that addresses the environmental consequences of renewing the withdrawal. The Draft LEIS was provided to elected officials, federal, state and local

government agencies; organizations, and individual citizens in late October 1998. Congress is the decision maker for the land withdrawal and will issue its decision through legislation.

For More Information

Further information on the renewal may be obtained by calling 915-568-6708 or toll-free 1-888-248-8329, Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., mountain time. At other times, leave a message and your call will be returned. The Fort Bliss public affairs staff (915-568-4505) and Fort Bliss Web site (www.bliss.army.mil) can provide additional information, or write to Fort Bliss Public Affairs Office, U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Center and Fort Bliss, Building 15, Fort Bliss, Texas 79916.

Comments on the Draft LEIS should be received by February 9, 1999. Please direct comments to Dr. Andy Vliet, Program Manager, McGregor Range Military Land Withdrawal Renewal, U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Center and Fort Bliss, Attn: ATZC-CSA, P.O. Box 6020, Fort Bliss, Texas 79906, or send e-mail to: mcmgregor@emh10.bliss.army.mil.
